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WASHINGTON, DC -- The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent, bipartisan Federal commission, today urged the U.S. government to raise the importance of respecting property rights of members of diverse religious minorities with the Turkish government, particularly with reference to the Mor Gabriel Monastery.

For decades, Turkey's government has attempted to confiscate lands belonging to Greek Orthodox churches. In a current instance, on February 11 a case involving the attempted seizure by Turkish authorities of land on which sits the 1,600 year-old Mor Gabriel Syriac Orthodox monastery will be heard by a local Turkish court. At this hearing, the court will determine if the 270 hectares of land belong to the government or the monastery.

Turkish land officials have attempted to redraw the monastery's boundary lines, claiming that when they were rebuilt by the monastery 15 years ago, the boundaries impinged on other land. Some village leaders have accused the local monks of "proselytism" for communicating their beliefs and language (Aramaic) to their students. Earlier efforts reportedly had been made to declare that the monastery had been reconstructed illegally.

"It is essential for the Turkish government to honor its obligations to uphold freedom of thought, conscience, religious and belief, as set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights," Gaer said.

"Moreover, the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne contains very specific protections for religious minorities that the government cannot allow itself to neglect."

Since Turkey became an independent state shortly after World War I, Christian minority populations have been shrinking due to repressive government policies. The population of Syriac Christians has fallen from 250,000 to about 20,000 and the Greek Orthodox minority has fallen from about 200,000 to 2,500.

USCIRF previously has called on the Turkish government to cease efforts to deny members of religious minorities the right to own and maintain property, to train religious clergy, and to offer religious education above high school. In court cases seeking to confiscate land belonging to religious minorities, USCIRF has expressed concern over the absence of the right to appeal judgments by the Turkish state in its confiscation of properties belonging to religious minorities.

In another case indicative of the same problem, the European Court of Human Rights ruled unanimously in the summer of 2008 in a case brought by the Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate that Turkey was in violation of Article 1 of Protocol No. 1 (protection of property) of the European Convention on Human Rights. The case concerned an orphanage owned by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the body that leads almost 300 million Orthodox Christians worldwide, on the Turkish island of Buyukada. USCIRF has urged Turkey to implement this ruling fully and to return ownership of the orphanage to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, but Turkey has yet to comply with the ruling of the European Court.